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SUBJECT: Lukashenko Forming an Obedient Electorate Ahead of the Presidential Elections

Refs: A) MINSK 1327, B) MINSK 1193, C) MINSK 607, D) MINSK 692

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Since the beginning of September, Lukashenko has stepped up populist efforts to buy the people's support for his election. At the same time, he has intensified his campaign to liquidate opposition forces within the media, youth, and workforce in order to prevent what he portrays as efforts to destabilize Belarus. By strengthening the status of state-controlled organizations and strangling opposition forces, the President is firming his grasp on the population ahead of the 2006 election. End Summary.

Raising the Standard of Living

Increasing Money Allowances

¶2. (SBU) Lukashenko recently increased financial allowances and wages for many demographic groups in Belarus. On October 28, the President issued an edict to raise disability and survivor benefits by USD 13 to USD 42 per month in order to protect the "vulnerable" citizens who cannot work. On August 27, Lukashenko ordered an 11 percent pension increase to USD 102 per month for all retired persons, who make up 25 percent of Belarus' population and are a large voting bloc. On October 19, Lukashenko issued an edict calling for a 20-percent increase in all types of student allowances so as to "increase their social protection" and awarded 1,500 gifted students financial aid from his "special" president fund. Though the increases are token and not enough to meet the growing costs of living in Belarus, the state media portrays the increases as testaments to Lukashenko's concern for his citizens.

Improving Village and Rural Infrastructure

¶3. (U) The President recently stated that his goal was to provide rural residents jobs and amenities typically found only in Minsk. At the beginning of 2005, Lukashenko implemented his five-year, USD 33 billion rural revival program (septel) that would provide rural residents with cheap new housing, improved schools, farm modernization, gas and electricity, roads, and gymnasiums. He also promised that the average wage would reach USD 250 per month by the

end of 2005. In October, the President ordered a USD 404 million remodeling plan for the Zhlobin (Gomel region) metallurgical plant (BMZ), the construction of 333 kilometers of gas lines to supply 12,000 homes in the Chernobyl-affected zone with natural gas, the construction of a brick plant in Loyev (Gomel region), and he opened gas lines in Slutsk (Mogilev). Other presidential gifts in 2005 included town face-lifts in Shklov and Alexandria (Lukashenko's hometowns) and Slutsk (ref A).

¶4. (SBU) Comment: Rural residents are happy to have remodeled villages and paved roads, but Post has heard complaints about shoddy construction work as a result of cost saving measures and Lukashenko's unrealistic deadlines. The state press, however, overlooks these setbacks and continues to portray Lukashenko as a hero for his generosity. In newspapers it is common to see pictures of Lukashenko turning on gas valves or opening factories with titles such as "I Did What I Promised" or "A USD 160 Million Present." Lukashenko also uses these events to publicly criticize and humiliate regional officials for not efficiently implementing his policies. This has allowed him to maintain the image that only he, and no one else, is capable of helping the people. End Comment.

Stability

Media

¶5. (U) At the September 30 session of the Belarusian Security Council, Lukashenko claimed the West was using the

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opposition to spread destructive information about the GOB to foment religious and ethnic conflicts in society, causing the people to lose faith in the government. Lukashenko called the campaign an "information war" and named the opposition Belarus' domestic enemy.

¶6. (U) In the course of this "information war", Lukashenko has stepped up his campaign against the independent press. In late September, the state-owned publishing companies annulled their contracts with independent newspaper Narodnaya Volya (NV) while authorities ordered the paper to pay a USD 45,000 lawsuit settlement (ref B). In October, the GOB controlled postal service stopped carrying NV and nine other independent newspapers on its subscription list, denying subscribers issues by mail. The courts also ordered the liquidations of regional newspapers, such as Grodno's Den and Borisov's Kurier. Legislation and presidential edicts (i.e., the prohibition of 'National and 'Belarusian' in an entities title (ref C), slander and defamation of GOB officials) constantly put newspapers on the brink of closure via fines and registration denials.

¶7. (U) With the media firmly under control, Lukashenko is now trying to bring his propaganda to a larger audience. On October 26, Lukashenko tasked the GOB to review construction plans for a 425-meter television tower capable of broadcasting 50 channels within a 100-km radius. In addition, he ordered state media officials to conduct "aggressive" propaganda of Belarus' image abroad via the state owned satellite channel Belarus-TV.

Youth Control

¶8. (SBU) In May the Ministry of Education (MoE) issued a memorandum ordering university and school administrators to expel students engaged in political activities (ref D) because, according to minister Aleksandr Radzkov, politics have no place in the classroom. This obviously meant "opposition" politics because on November 16, Radzkov

claimed school and university heads are political figures who should follow and support the state line and prevent opposition activists from spreading "disunity" among the students. Apart from expulsions and firings, Post has heard reports of authorities threatening student opposition activists with military service or village "exile" to Chernobyl-contaminated regions.

¶9. (U) Students are allowed to be politically active, but only in the name of the government sponsored Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU), formerly the Communist Youth Union (Komsamol). The BRYU has 305,000 members, but at the BRYU's 39th conference on September 23, President Lukashenko predicted all students and young adults would soon be members of the BRYU. He then called for the resignation of school administrators and teachers who are critical of GOB efforts to boost BRYU membership. BRYU's large membership is attributed to the fact that it is easier to gain admittance to a university or find housing with a BRYU membership. Membership also gives students discounts on many services and items from haircuts to movies and, in some instances, free cars and apartments.

¶10. (U) As youth opposition groups are being harassed and unable to grow, the BRYU is monopolizing the influence over the youth. On October 26, Lukashenko published his protocol calling for the BRYU to be incorporated into all social, political, and economic spheres, control all student movements, to bolster patriotism in the classroom, help with the state's ideology program, and secure the country against destabilization efforts. BRYU members are encouraged to preach their pro-GOB beliefs in the classrooms and are allowed to hold demonstrations and/or meetings without government interference.

Labor

¶11. (U) The Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus (FTUB) is Belarus' largest trade union with an inflated membership of four million. [Comment: The entire Belarusian workforce is four million, leaving doubt as to whether this is a true figure.] The FTUB is pro-Lukashenko and, as a reward for

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its support, receives privileges from the President that are denied to independent trade unions. In July, the President gave the FTUB the authority to inspect all enterprises, state owned or private, for compliance with labor regulations regardless of whether or not the enterprises have FTUB members. In October, the Ministry of Labor (MoL) issued a directive allowing the FTUB to check the wage payment system of enterprises and report their findings to the MoL.

¶12. (U) Independent trade unions do not have these capabilities and are finding it more difficult to defend their constituents' rights. The contract system continues to be an efficient tool for the GOB to control the workforce, allowing employers to dismiss a worker for his/her beliefs or participation in an independent union. The threat of job loss is one of the main reasons why independent union membership is falling. Unlike the FTUB, union officials are rarely allowed to inspect workplace sites or disseminate information without facing fines or arrest. Even rallies and meetings are impossible because venues refuse to host any independent union event whereas a new presidential decree allows the FTUB to use state-owned offices and conference halls free of charge.

Comment

¶13. (SBU) Lukashenko's current campaign strategy is to appease the people with carrots while beating back the opposition with the many sticks at his disposal and serving

the public with visions of U.S. inspired destabilization. The elderly and disabled will continue to remain quiet as long as they continue to receive their meager pensions, which is better than no pension at all. Students, knowing that it is next to impossible to find a decent job in Belarus without a diploma, are not willing to oppose the President if it means their expulsion. Likewise, workers are not going to protest their pay and working conditions or participate in the independent labor movement if it means job loss. With the use of government-sponsored organizations to control the media, school system, and workforce, Lukashenko is hoping to create an ever more obedient population. But we wonder how much of the resentment he is creating will come back to haunt him and his cronies in crime.

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